

Interview with Karma Phuntsho

JTL Editors

Dr. Karma Phuntsho is a leading Bhutanese historian and intellectual. He is the author of the definitive Bhutanese chronicle *The History of Bhutan* and *Mipham's Dialectics and the Debates on Emptiness*. He speaks and writes extensively on Bhutan and on Buddhism. He is also the founder of Loden Foundation, a leading educational and cultural initiative in Bhutan. He received his monastic training in Bhutan and India and his DPhil in Oriental Studies from Oxford University. This interview has been edited for style and clarity.

Journal of Tibetan Literature: We have a series of questions. We want to start with something a little bit more specific before we move out to a wider territory. One could make an argument that the eighteenth century is a golden age of Bhutanese literature—the long eighteenth century, from the end of Tsang Khenchen's life up to the end of the Tenth to Twelfth Jé Khenpo's lives—when writers are really starting to work with poetry in *gur* (*mgur*) form and *nyen ngak* (*snyan ngag*) form, in autobiographical writing and different kinds of historical writing, etc. What do you make of this notion of a golden age of Bhutanese literature?

Karma Phuntsho: I agree with you. I often look at that period as the period of high art, culture, and literature. I think that happened as part of general historical processes. Before Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, as we know, Bhutan was not unified. So for any artistic and literary culture to emerge, you need some kind of a strong political and financial support which didn't quite exist. The best we have are from the lamas of Pema Lingpa's tradition from Central Bhutan and almost nothing or very little from Western Bhutan before Shabdrung. During the early years of state formation, one can assume that there wasn't enough political stability, and as a result, there was no economic and financial support of the sort required for big projects. We do know that during Tenzin Rabgyé's time, at least during his reign, there was quite a lot of artistic and cultural work happening. But I think it wouldn't have been as extensive and rigorous as during Sherab Wangchuk's time, and that is exactly the time you are referring to.

This is the thirteenth civil ruler Desi Sherab Wangchuk, an extraordinary leader, and I personally think he was not only a very charismatic and capable statesman who could bring together warring factions and bring peace to the land, but also bring together all the brightest minds to create a national narrative and to create a new sort of intellectual and literary culture. So I would give a great deal of credit to Sherab Wangchuk. Sadly, Bhutan hasn't paid due tribute and respects

to this visionary leader. I personally think Sherab Wangchuk must have been quite a visionary, as well as a very accommodating and open-minded person to bring things together, and to bring great minds like Shakya Rinchen, Yönten Thayé, Tenzin Chogyal, Kunga Gyatso, and many others together. I'm inclined to even think they came up with a new theory of Shabdrung's reincarnation into *Ku Sung Thuk* (*sku gsung thugs*), a total revision of the system to help accommodate the rival groups. So my view is, as you said, the eighteenth century is the best pre-modern period of Bhutanese literary and artistic culture.

JTL: So with this as a background, now that we've thought about a golden age of Bhutanese literature, I wonder if it's possible to think more broadly about a history of Bhutanese literature, and what that history would look like? Are there moments or periods where there are definable changes or transformations in approaches to literature or particular compositions that really mark an important moment?

KP: On my part, I've proposed a historical periodization for Bhutan. Until recently, we didn't really have a commonly accepted periodization, and what we had were very vague ones without sufficient justification. So if you visited the Paro Museum, you would have periods like the "Dawn of Bhutan's History." I am not quite sure what that may mean. My proposal was that we look at Bhutan's history in comparison to historiographical literature abroad, and also work with the history of the neighboring countries, particularly Tibet, because Tibet had a major role to play in terms of Bhutan's literary culture.

I was arguing that until the seventh century one could call that the prehistoric period, because there's hardly any historical evidence for anything we say before that period. Beginning with the construction of Jampa Lhakhang in Bumthang and Kyichu Lhakhang in Paro, as part of the thirteen temples of Songtsen Gampo, although we don't have evidence or written records from that period itself, we have fairly reliable later sources which recount these events. So my argument was that there is no clear historical evidence for anything that happened before the seventh or mid-seventh century. Therefore, one can call the period before that prehistoric. Surely one can depend on some material evidence, and I think there have been quite a lot of findings, archaeological and others, that predate society in Bhutan before the seventh century. So certainly human settlements and farming must have existed. In fact, I personally believe Paro and Bumthang and many other valleys to have been quite thriving economic centers, because they form a north to south gateway between China, Tibet, and India.

However, as we do not have clear historical evidence, my proposal is to call until the seventh century the prehistoric times. Then we have what aligns with the *Ngadar* (*snga dar*) period in Tibet and the *Phyidar* (*phyi dar*) period—although that separation won't be applicable to Bhutan in a very strict sense, but all the way from the seventh until the unification of Bhutanese valleys

in the seventeenth century, I think of as the early historical period. From the seventeenth century onwards, I prefer to call this the medieval period, because, like the medieval period in Europe, there was a centralized theocratic government or theocratic system which supported quite a lot of cultural and religious activities, and society as a whole was generally divided into the three classes of the nobilities, the ordinary citizens, and the serfs. So a lot of what was there in medieval Europe, you could find it mirrored in Bhutanese society as well in terms of the social stratification, theocratic political center, the support for religious and artistic culture, and so forth. So from the seventeenth century till the twentieth century, I say, is the medieval period, using the same kind of yardstick and parameters that historians in Europe use. Then from the early twentieth century until the mid-twentieth century is what I would call the pre-modern period, and modernity arrives fully only in the late 1950s. I am aware some people find it tricky to accept this because for most parts of the world, these periods would be many centuries earlier, such as the modern era starting from the European Enlightenment and industrial revolution.

I also try to align the historical periodization with the three different phases of cultural evolution, the earliest cultural phase being the Pre-Buddhist phase of nature-based localized belief systems which are animistic and shamanic in nature. Then came the introduction of Buddhism but we really don't know how far it might have spread. However, we certainly know that from then on, every century there were missionaries coming in, and more and more people taking up Buddhism, which brought a mind-centered outlook and ethos. These two systems continue as dominant worldviews until the twentieth century, when the third phase of a secular, scientific, and materialistic culture spread through programs of modernization and globalization, particularly the mainstream modern education.

JTL: You know that we use in the English language, and probably other European languages, the term "Tibetan literature" to refer to traditions of writing, but also culture more broadly, that extend across a wide geographic landscape and across a number of contemporary Asian states. And as a scholar of literature and history from Bhutan, what do you make of that? How do you navigate that? And within that, what is the current role of a term or an idea like *chöké* (*chos skad*), which in a non-Bhutanese context, we call *Böké* (*bod skad*)?

KP: This helps me get back to an earlier point, which I forgot to share. When you look at the historical development of Bhutanese literature, I want to emphasize that we should not see literature only in written forms. Sometimes our discourse on literature is totally biased towards written literature. In this respect, before the unification of Bhutan, before there was a centralized theocratic support for written culture, much of the literature existed in oral forms. These are the genres of *neshé* (*gnas bshad*) stories you find about holy sites and holy objects, *jungrab* (*'byung rabs*) or origin narratives, and ballads and poems called *lozey* and *tsangmo*, songs, proverbs, toponyms, recita-

tions, jokes, etc. Many of these oral literature or unwritten literary compositions convey a lot of historical information. So I personally have been arguing that if you look at Bhutan in the past, particularly before the 1960s, before the mainstream education system, about 80% of the people would have been illiterate. But they passed down their literary and cultural knowledge, values, and skills in oral forms.

And that is very true even in my own family. Many of the stories I heard from my parents are unwritten, oral stories, and even now we don't have them written down. A lot of our place narratives explaining toponyms and pilgrimage guides are oral; there are written pilgrimage guides, but the number of unwritten pilgrimage guides exceed the written ones. So when you look at that, then you see that before the medieval period the dominant literary culture was oral in nature, and I think, with the introduction of the central monastic body and religious education, you find more and more people writing, and as you all know, Himalayan people do love writing about their lives, or the lives of their teachers, and that's why we have a fairly rich literature of life writing.

Now talking about the term "Tibetan," of course I have no qualms using the term Tibetan. Because "Tibetan" to a lot of us means something that's bigger and broader than the political Tibet of the recent past. We cannot deny that because if you open up a volume of the Kangyur, you will not find "*Rgya dkar skad du*" and "*chos skad du*," you will find "*Rgya dkar skad du*" and "*Bod skad du*." So I think a lot of the people don't have any issue with the term "Tibetan." But then, when one conflates classical Tibetan—what Bhutanese call "*chos skad*"—with the colloquial Tibetan that Tibetans speak now, there's a problem of misunderstanding because Bhutanese do not speak colloquial Tibetan. Even within Tibet, there has to be this distinction of colloquial Tibetan as a spoken language, and classical Tibetan, which I think most Bhutanese would agree is the Latin of the Himalayas. So it shouldn't be solely associated with Central Tibet or the political Tibet that we talk about. So a lot of the scholars, our elders, generally don't have any issues using the term "*Bod skad*" although the effort to replace "*Bod skad*" with "*chos skad*" has been quite effective. The effort started in the 1960s when they began the promotion of Dzongkha as the national language and referring to classical Tibetan as "*chos skad*" instead of "*Bod skad*." I think Bhutan had good reasons to establish a distinct cultural and linguistic identity by basically trying to counteract the Chinese colonial approach on the one hand, and some internal issues that the Bhutanese and the Tibetans had in 1970s and 1980s. To me classical Tibetan, *chos skad*, or classical Dzongkha are the same, but colloquial Tibetan and colloquial Dzongkha are different. In terms of how young Bhutanese use the term, I think the vast majority would probably be used to referring to classical Tibetan as "*chos skad*" instead of as "*Bod skad*."

JTL: So I want to invite you to elaborate more on the first part of your answer to the last question. What is Bhutanese literature?

KP: So I would say there are two types of Bhutanese literature. There's the high literature, the literature associated with high religious culture. Then there is also the folk literature, which is mostly in oral forms and localized and is composed of so many genres or types. There's quite a lot of historical information one can glean from these, and these can be very different from what you would find in other parts of the Himalayas, because folk literature relates directly to the immediate surroundings, and to the foodways, dress, farming, etc. Because of the geographic difference, these are quite different from what happens on the Tibetan plateau.

The literature associated with religion is almost the same as Tibetan religious literature. When we talk about *namthar* (*rnam thar*), a hagiography, we have the same type of literature. So the subject of the text might be Bhutanese, but if somebody were to read it without thinking about the specific place or the person, it might sound exactly like a Tibetan master's biography. The high religious cultures in Bhutan and Tibet remain very similar in doctrinal and contemplative traditions, although there are also significant differences. When you look at how monks perform a ritual, wear their robes, or chant religious prayers, there are a lot of differences. But the differences are greater in folk literature. So when you ask what is Bhutanese literature, I would say Bhutanese literature consists of these two elements, one that is mostly religious and Buddhist in content and quite close to Tibet, and the other element that is much more local.

JTL: And when you say folk literature, are you talking about song or poetry, or prose, or narrative? Can you give us some examples?

KP: By folk literature, I'm referring to literary compositions that are common among the ordinary people and not exclusive to people who have mastered *nyen ngak*, for instance, or people who have gone through monastic education. Rather, this is something that happens in a local vernacular language and is accessible to anybody who speaks that language. So you have *tsangmo*, for instance, which is a very common genre of poetry with six syllables predominantly found in central and eastern parts of Bhutan. People sing *tsangmo* in tunes as a monologic expression or as part of poetic conversation or debates.

In western parts of Bhutan, the most popular genre of literary composition would be *lozey*, which I don't think exists in Tibet in any form. The distinct mark of *lozey* is the accentuation of certain syllables in the line. Unlike *tsangmo*, it is not sung in tunes but spoken, like reading a poem, in both general speech and dialogues. Because a lot of these have remained as an oral tradition, even now there are debates on how to spell the terms *tsangmo* and *lozey*. For instance, some write it as *blo mdzes*, meaning beautiful speech because *blo* in Dzongkha is speech. A lot of people also use the orthography *blo ze*, "ze" like the crest of a rooster or the crest of a hill, because this is supposed to be the crest of speech. Both *tsangmo* and *lozey* compositions contain a lot of metaphors, similes, imagery, satire, and humor.

Bhutan has a rich culture of *lozey* and *tsangmo* because a lot of ordinary people would know dozens of them and also regularly compose new ones, some even extemporaneously. There aren't that many people left now who can do that. Let me tell you a story. I was going to Nephuk Monastery in Paro to digitize the archive there in 2009. When we got to the junction, we were told that the road had been washed away by the monsoon showers. So we were stuck with our equipment, and my friends went looking for a porter and a pony. I was waiting at the roadside wearing my bamboo hat, when an old man, quite wobbly, showed up and started singing.

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This roughly translates as:

The bamboo hat from eastern Daga region.
 You're my bamboo hat during sunny days,
 And somebody else's during rainy days.
 If you are somebody else's during rainy days,
 What use do I have for you during sunny days?

“You chant this to an unfaithful partner who leaves you in your rainy days,” he said. I was mesmerized and asked him to chant it again and also share more. He agreed reluctantly after I got him a beer and we sat down by the roadside. He chanted many more *lozeys*, some of which contained beautiful expressions and wonderful allegories, and others with raw humor and satire.

In those days, I had a small Nokia phone with which I recorded. At that moment, it occurred to me that this old man—who was already quite tipsy when I met him, with many hours still left in the day, and he would clearly be totally drunk by the end of the day—is in his eighties, and when he dies, most of the *lozeys* he chanted for me would disappear with him. That encouraged me to go out and do a five-year project of documentation of intangible cultures in partnership with the University of Virginia.

On another occasion, an old woman chanted a *lozey* seeing my bamboo hat. So just with this one bamboo hat that I wore, I was able to provoke people into chanting these lines. I think the *lozey* genre is a unique literary heritage of Western Bhutan, and we have only a few people who are very good at it now.

The other folk literature includes oral pilgrimage guides and local narratives, which you hear

when you go to a temple or an important site. The village elder or caretaker starts to give a fabulous history of the place bringing the place to life. Bhutan is also very rich in proverbs in some two dozen languages spoken in the country. There are a few books already documenting the proverbs in Dzongkha. Then there are recitations full of fabulous expressions, which people chant during festivals, house constructions, weddings, funerals, or other occasions to instill the right mood.

To these one may add the thousands of folk songs and dances, which vary from region to region. There are songs unique to a village or region, like the Ashi Lhamo of Ura, Belmo of Mangde, Ausa of Haa, Khore of Pemagatshel. Bhutanese are very ardent singers and dancers and there are numerous occasions when people sing and dance in groups. Traditional Bhutan has a very rich and nuanced music culture, people know which song and dance are right for the occasion, but today you find young Bhutanese inappropriately singing a sad song of heartbreak at a festive occasion.

Then, there are countless folk stories, which vary in their length and style as one moves from valley to valley. Some are short, some long, some about heroism, others about love, yet others about wildlife, supernatural beings, magic, wonder, renunciation, faith, spirituality, and many other themes and topics. There are also riddles, which have different names in different regions, tongue twisters, jokes, and curse words, which are hilarious oral literary creations.

JTL: These are wonderful stories, and this has been so helpful in thinking broadly about the unique features of Bhutan's literature, written and oral. Let's now turn to your own work, especially your *History of Bhutan* which is, I think, the longest and the most detailed treatment of the subject in English. You talked a little bit about your own thinking about the periodization of Bhutan's history. Could you say a little bit about how that project formed for you and the process that you went through to bring it to completion? Can you also touch on why you chose to publish it in English?

KP: To give you a little bit of a background, when I completed my DPhil at Oxford, I went to do a post-doc at CNRS in Paris in 2003. This is when Stephen Hugh-Jones and Hildegard Diemberger at Cambridge got a grant to look at the books brought out by the Younghusband Expedition in 1903. A hundred years after the British mission to Tibet, which I consider an invasion, they wanted to look at the collection and assess its significance as a whole. Gene Smith and Alak Zenkar Rinpoché recommended me for that work. So I ended up at Cambridge in the spring of 2004 to look through these books which were in the British Library, the Cambridge University Library, and Oxford's Bodleian Library. This project basically revealed to me how much work I could also do in Bhutan because, unlike many other places, Bhutan has this fortune of uninterrupted continuity—there was no colonization, no sad events like the Cultural Revolution, and no social unrest or environmental calamity which damaged our cultural heritage.

The work in these British libraries inspired me to start work in Bhutan on the archives, and

I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time. Prior to this, Rob Mayer wanted a couple books from the Nyingma Gyubum collection from Gangteng, and it took me two months to get permission—but when I finally got the permission it wasn't just for a few books, but for the entire collection. So I spent two months in a cold temple room in Gangteng all alone, photographing the entire Nyingma Gyubum collection using a very small digital camera which was probably one of the earliest digital cameras available in the market.

Soon after that, the British Library announced the Endangered Archives Programme, and I put in a proposal to digitize all of Ganteng's collection, as I have already done a pilot project. That was how we started the digitization program in Bhutan in 2004, and I had a ground team to do the actual digitization. The EAP was happy with our work, and we had three more grants so far.

When my own three-year contract at Cambridge was coming to an end, Stephen Hugh-Jones asked me if I wanted to stay on at Cambridge, which I did. So we created a five-year project on the history of the Pema Lingpa tradition in Bhutan, and we got a grant from the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council. Through this, we could digitize the libraries associated with the Pema Lingpa tradition across Bhutan. I delved into the project, digitizing lots of books, editing existing digital inputs prepared by the students of Gangteng Tulku Rinpoché, and doing new digital inputs. It was our hope to produce a new corpus of Pema Lingpa teachings, increasing it from 21 volumes compiled by His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoché in 1976 to over 30 volumes.

My plan was also to write a history of the Pema Lingpa tradition but, even after all the exploration and research, I could find full biographies of only six out of thirty main hierarchs. For the rest there was very scanty information, just names and places, and I didn't feel confident enough to write a history of the tradition. However, I was doing a lot of background work on Bhutan for the project, and I did a sweeping study of Bhutan's history century by century, reading every source, traditional or secondary, available at that time. By the middle of the project, I realized that I had enough material for a history of Bhutan. So the book was an accidental outcome and there was no specific project for it. I wrote it mostly between 5pm and 2am, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. So that's how it happened, as a byproduct of the Pema Lingpa project.

Many people ask me why I wrote in English. I wrote in English because the work was done for Cambridge University. When I couldn't publish the history of the Pema Lingpa tradition, I produced text critical editions of the biographies of Pema Lingpa, his son, and his grandson. To supplement these books, I decided to submit the *History of Bhutan* as an outcome of the project. More importantly, there are at least seven complete histories of Bhutan in classical Dzongkha, but there was none in English. There are the religious histories written by Tenzin Chogyal and Gedün Rinchen, political histories written by Pema Tshewang and Phuntsho Wangdi, and a cultural history written by Lopen Nado. These have been published and there are two other full political histories which were never properly published. In English, there are some full histories by Indian authors but merely touching the surface and most of them reproducing earlier works. The good

historical works by academics such as Michael Aris and John Ardussi only covered specific eras and not the full history. So there was a gap to fill.

JTL: It's kind of crazy that you were going to do a smaller, narrow project, and then what you ended up doing is this really ambitious and huge project. Now we want to ask you about Loden Foundation, because you are not only a scholar and historian and one of Bhutan's leading public intellectuals, but you also do really important work on the ground in Bhutan that impacts the lives of ordinary Bhutanese. Loden Foundation, which you established in 1999, is dedicated to fostering an enlightened and happy society through the promotion of education, social entrepreneurship, and Bhutanese culture and traditions. So our question is, how do you see Bhutanese literature fitting into the broader mission of Loden? Also, you recently inaugurated Loden Library in Thimphu. Can you tell us more about the library?

KP: Let me deal with the last question first. The Bodhitse library that I launched recently is not actually part of Loden. It's right next to historic Changangkha Temple, on a small plot which I bought some 18 years ago with the hope of putting it to some good use. It took some time for me to pay back the loans I got to buy the land and then save money to start building something. I always wanted to create a center for study and contemplation. Thimphu has over a thousand bars even before the government recently dropped the requirement for a bar license, but there are only two libraries. So imagine the kind of social impact such development has on people's mind and health. I wanted to build a library and space for study and contemplation where people can walk in to read, discuss, and meditate, and we can also run events on culture and spirituality. I finished much of the construction work but just before we opened it, Covid struck us. Thus, the project got delayed, and I am pleased that I could launch it this year with a fairly good sized library and a nice space for study and meditation. We inaugurated it this year on the holy day of Drukpa Tseshi, the fourth day of the sixth month, the day of the Buddha's first sermon. One of the senior most Drukpa figures, the former Dorjé Lopen Ngawang Tenzin, who is about 88 years old and lives in Paro as a hermit more or less, came and gave the full *Dakpo Thargyen* (*dwags po thar rgyan*), Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* teachings, and a Manjushri empowerment.

And then, in August and September 2023, I read the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* lessons every evening for about twenty-five people. So that's the hope, that we can create this space from which to put out a message of wisdom and compassion that can spread to combat the negative influences from so many sides and directions. Bhutanese youth, like any youth around the world, are facing serious challenges, especially with screen addiction, mental health problems, and so forth.

As for Loden, it was something I started way back when I was a student in 1999. I was lucky to be in a situation where I had gotten a very good education, partly because of my own stubbornness. I got a very good school education in Bhutan, and then I became a monk and went to South

India, where I got the best monastic education with the Tibetans. Then I was lucky enough to get this scholarship to come and join Oxford. So while at Balliol College, Oxford, I thought I could do something to give back the kind of opportunity I had got. I was thinking of doing something. The immediate trigger came from my friendship with Robert Miles, who was from Wales. He was an ex-policeman, a very tall, well-built and sturdy chap, who was the head porter of my college at Oxford. A college porter is both security and the receptionist at the gate. We became good friends. He told me that he had never finished school. He was born at a time when England was at war, and his family was poor. He ended up going to work on a boat as a cabin boy and never finished school. He wanted to help someone else who might be deprived of a school education because of financial difficulties. All he could spare was 50 pounds a year from his low salary. So I took those 50 pounds when I went back to Bhutan, and I asked the school principal in my village if he could find someone who would really benefit from that money. He said: "Our school cook!" The school cook had eight daughters. So we used the 50 pounds to buy uniforms and shoes and books for one of the daughters, this little girl, who was six then. Tenzin has now not only finished school and graduated from a college, but she has been a history teacher for about six or seven years now.

So that's how we started. Other friends knew about it and also wanted to contribute. As the number grew, we formalized the channel. I got in touch with Kunzang Choden, who is the foremost female writer in Bhutan. She was also my teacher when I was in school, and we kept in close contact. She lived in Bumthang at the time. So I mentioned to her that I could raise this money in Oxford and asked if she could identify the children in Bhutan. So that's how we started the child sponsorship program and founded the Loden Foundation.

We started with this child sponsorship initially but by 2003, other organizations, which had better resources, had also started similar programs. So we decided to find new gaps to fill. That is when we began doing early learning centers or pre-schools because there were no pre-schools outside Thimphu. We found three clustered communities, one in Bumthang, one in Mangar, one in Samtse, and we still run pre-schools there for three- to six-year-old children. Since 2012, we have also funded university scholarships for outstanding students from disadvantaged backgrounds for subjects which Bhutan needs or would need in the near future. We have funded some 90 college scholarships so far. Then, there are also educational forums like Bhutan Dialogues, which we started for public education.

In 2007 or so, I was with my French friends in the Alps for Christmas. Anne Tardy, the wife, studied Tibetan with me, and Gerard Tardy, the husband, is a venture capitalist who had just sold his business. They asked what they could do for Bhutan. I jumped at the opportunity and told them there is a whole new challenge in Bhutan with youth unemployment. In the twentieth century, all young people coming out of schools and colleges were absorbed by the government, but the civil service was big and saturated by the beginning of this century; and most young people who could no longer find jobs in the government ended up jobless because the private sector was

too poor and small. They didn't want to go back to the farm. With his business background, I said, why don't we start a business education program where we bring these young people and teach them how to think of business ideas, train them to write business proposals, and then fund them to start their businesses. That project has been going on since 2008, and we have now supported close to 300 projects financially and some 6,000 young Bhutanese have gone through our training. It is one of the biggest programs we run. Beside training, funding, and post-funding support through monitoring and mentoring, Loden also runs events and creates networks to promote the spirit of social entrepreneurship.

Meanwhile my own academic and culture work was on-going on the side, without technically being part of Loden. When we did the cultural documentation work in partnership with the University of Virginia, we needed some kind of legal status. So we started the Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research. When that project came to an end, the staff of Shejun joined Loden and we merged Shejun with Loden.

Now, why do I do all this work? I must say I have this belief that we have to be practical academics, with our academic work making some contribution to the wellbeing of the world. Bhutan's case is actually quite interesting in that it's a late comer, and as a result, has the advantages of learning from the mistakes of others. Bhutan certainly learned from Sikkim to avoid the mistake that Sikkim made. I think Bhutan has to a large extent also learned the mistake other parts of the world have made but then there are also new challenges. If you look at the business world, you don't want to have this typical neoliberal capitalist model to destroy everything else, including the environment, for the sake of profit. I think the culture of having responsible businesspeople, at least for Bhutan, was quite timely, and was also quite doable. The private sector was so young and small that you could groom a whole new batch of businesspersons with ethics and a sense of responsibility.

And in education, we could bring in a lot of things from the Buddhist educational traditions and integrate them into mainstream school education, and even into public education. So that's where my role as a Buddhist scholar comes in—in trying to bring in the strengths and the virtues from the traditional monastic Buddhist education system into our public education system and trying to bring in Buddhist values and Bodhisattva ethics into business. So far, we have done quite well, actually, in promoting that. We are always arguing for business that benefits both oneself and others, and trying to bring in the notions of compassion, and the practice of the six perfections in actual real life, beyond the Dharma center space.

You know the Bodhisattva practice of *duwai ngöpo shi* (*bsdu ba'i dngos po bzhi*), or four strategies of attraction. We implement this in the Loden entrepreneurship program. If you were to just tell people that they should come and learn how to be good businesspeople, they most likely will not show up. But when we say we are going to give them interest-free and collateral-free funds, you see this surge of interest. So first we have to give, and then once we attract them through giving, then

we do the sweet-talking to convert them. That's when we convince them to follow our criteria of being socially beneficial through job creation, filling a gap, import substitution, being of benefit to the community, etc., and being environment-friendly and culturally sensitive. So we explain these conditions with good justifications for sustainability. Once they are engaged, we then show them examples and help them. We have been doing well with these innovative ideas that align very well with sustainability and Buddhist thinking.

Also, as a cultural scholar, I have been trying to help people appreciate our spiritual ecology and the benefit it has for environment conservation. We have run environment conservation projects in which we leverage people's cultural beliefs. A good example is the Tali Lake project, in which we brought together the local priests, government officials, and conservation scientists to come together and revive the lake.

JTL: It's so inspiring to hear about the kind of grassroots work that you've done, and the effects that it's had. You've really worked hard to meet people where they are, and it's amazing to hear all of the various ways you've been able to help people. And that leads us to a final question which I think is relevant here as it brings us back to the topic of literature. What role, if any, do you see Bhutanese literature playing in the future—in the future flourishing of Bhutanese culture writ large across the board in the coming decades?

KP: I often try to unpack Bhutan's complex and colorful cultural world for people. I often tell people that if you were to really understand me as a Bhutanese, or my father or mother, there's so many layers, and you'll certainly not find a solid Karma inside as we know from the Buddhist theory of no-self. I'm like an onion, I say, but if you peel me off, there are many layers, and of those layers there are two that are very, very powerful and pervasive—and this is something that we share not only as Bhutanese, but perhaps across the Himalayas and even beyond. But most parts of the world have lost these layers or these cultural features. And in Bhutan to this day, quite a lot of people have them. The first one is our connection to nature.

You look at the Bhutanese lifestyle and worldview, and a lot of things that they do are direct expressions of their connection to nature. Our connection to nature goes beyond just tangible things, like the clothes we wear and the food we eat, although in pre-modern times the food and clothes were also directly linked to our immediate surroundings. In Bumthang I grew up eating buckwheat as a staple food, and rice took over only when I was a teenager. We grew what we had in the locality. I remember growing up wearing mostly woolen clothes. But things have changed now, of course. But anyway, beyond this, there's also this belief in the natural forces, and I think that dictates a lot of the Bhutanese lifestyle even to this day. Why do we do the land ceremony before beginning construction or the rituals before sowing, in the middle of cultivation, and at the time of the harvest—a lot of these are basically ways to negotiate with the forces of nature and to

have a very good and harmonious relationship with nature, and I think that regard for nature has definitely contributed hugely to Bhutan's success in environment conservation. We wouldn't be the champion of environmental conservation with such large swaths of pristine forests or be the first carbon negative country, if we didn't have that belief system which connected us to nature, and which still does. But we could easily lose it if we are not careful in the next few decades with secularization and materialism. When my father or mother looks at the mountains beyond our village, they would think of it as the abode of Ashi Lhamo, or other specific deities, and when my nephews and nieces look at it, they would think of it as a chemical process of atoms and molecules and so forth. So the whole worldview is changing, and the behavior also changes as a result. If a young person with weak belief in natural forces has a power chainsaw in hand, they are quite likely to go and cut down trees with no inhibition, something most traditional villagers would not dare.

So I think this regard for nature, which is at the moment still quite alive but vulnerable, is not only beneficial to Bhutan but something I think Bhutan can share with the rest of the world. The methods and ways to create that very intimate connection with nature may vary and change, but the connection itself is so fundamental to human well-being across the world. Even in Bhutan, with the new modern education now, you can't enforce the same kind of belief in territorial deities and this host of other non-human, invisible spirits. However, the country has done quite well in terms of transitioning from such beliefs-based control to a more legislation-based mechanism. We now have a 60% forest cover requirement in the Constitution, with some 50-plus areas as protected areas and so forth. So in the case of the environment, Bhutan has managed to find a good transition in the case of the environment.

Then, the second feature is really thinking about the inner state of the spirit and the Buddhist approach of this outlook with the mind in the center. And I think the materialistic and secular education puts too much focus on the matter outside. We really need to have this focus on the mind, the primary ingredient of happiness, because as soon as you start to think happiness is out there, then we will end up being more materialistic, just like others, and lose that traditional approach. With so much distraction and confusion caused by the digital revolution, there is today even a greater need for such inward reflection and focus. That's why Buddhist culture is so important for the future of Bhutan.

These values and practices, including the connection to nature and the focus on the mind, the culture of contentment, loving-kindness, compassion, law of causation, and interconnectedness are enshrined and preserved in our literature, whether they be the high literature like the Kangyur and the biographies of the lamas, or the vernacular folk literature, such as the pilgrimage guides, folk tales, *lozeys*, *tsangmos*, recitations, and proverbs. The literary culture that we have had so far transmitted these values very effectively for many centuries. Literature is so important for the transmission and promotion of these values and traditions.

